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## *Double Take*

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## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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# DOUBLE TAKE

*by Earl G. Fisher*

"Blasted flies," he screamed and whammed the huge leather belt down on the table. Plates and goblets flew into the air and crashed back down on the table.

"I curse you, fly." Wham!

"Back to your cursed father, Baal-zebub, vermin." Wham!

The table was in total disarray. The twin apprentices, Nancy and Nathan, seemed frozen in their chairs. Neither moved. Neither spoke a word. Their eyes were wide, like two sets of twin moons in a cold, still sky.

The twins had been apprenticed to the sorcerer John for only a month now. They had never seen him in such a tantrum as this.

The fly, a biting deerfly, had yet to be touched. It seemed to anticipate every swing of the huge belt, a quarter-inch-thick piece of leather, three feet long and half a foot wide, with a braided handle on the end. John had made it just for killing flies.

John swooshed the belt wildly in the air as he chased the deerfly.

"Cursed be Abriman, Seth, Baal-Zevuv, Lucifer and Venus... all one... all the same." He smashed the belt above his head on the exposed timber forming the ceiling joist.

John noticed the apprentices were quiet. A rare occasion for the twin twelve-year-olds. He might have to get irritated more often if it would keep their ever-questioning mouths closed.

"Humph. Got away." He seated himself back in the huge, polished oak chair at the head of the table. In his regal chair he regained his regal composure.

"Eat, Nancy. Eat, Nathan. You will both need fuel to help you clean this mess caused by the most cursed of all living animals, the fly." John drank a large draught of spring water from his silver goblet, the only one that remained upright. He speared into his salad with his wooden fork, searching for crisp leaves of butter-bur and feverfew.

"What were we discussing when we were so rudely rent?" John requested. The apprentices were slowly eating their salads.

"We were discussing why you have such a weird name, oh powerful one," Nancy timidly offered.

John banged his fist on the table. "No honorifics. I told you and your brother. I am not the 'powerful one,' the 'divine wizard,' the 'consummate astrologer,' et cetera, et cetera. I am John. If need be, John the Sorcerer. No more. No less."

"But John is not a sorcerer's name," Nathan volunteered.

"And why," John asked, "in the name of Magusai not?"

It's a fine name. A noble name. I'll wager you a basket of tarragon that at least forty villagers in your own town are named John. Are they not fine men?"

"We think you need a magical name, Sorcerer John," said Nancy. "We've been working on names and have three we think you would like."

The disruption had worn off and the twins were acting more like their normal selves.

"Theoprastes, Archilanchus and Glenweld Mighty Grasp," Nathan proposed. "Glenweld Mighty Grasp is my idea. I like it best."

"We have more if you feel none of those suits you," Nancy said.

"Suits me? Why, none of those ridiculous names suits me at all. They are some other person's names. My name is John. John, it will remain. Eat. And Nathan, use your fork, not your fingers."

The twins could tell by John's balled-up fists resting on the table that the name conversation was over. They ate quietly, yet they wanted to complain mightily about the fare. Even though they were from a poor family, they were used to having mutton and bread with their meals. "Master John's garbage pail," as they called it only when speaking to each other, was a mystical blend of roots, herbs and greens. They felt John's "salads" were more suited to sheep and goats than humans. Especially a sorcerer's human apprentices.

"Dogflies, deerflies, catflies, horseflies, sheepflies, houseflies... there is no end to the cursed species." John was off again on his latest maledictory. "They bite, they crawl over one, they wander through one's food as if it were their own. They sap the very blood from one. And that shall be your task tomorrow."

The twins looked at each other in puzzlement.

"Are we to catch them or curse them, Master?" Nancy inquired.

"I am thinking, child. The task shall be in two parts. The first, due promptly three hours after sunrise, is to devise a way to rid the world of flies. You are to be restricted...no magic. For the first portion of the task, you must use only the mundane and your imagination. Hopefully, they won't be one and the same."

John rose from the table and wiped his long brown mustache on his silk sleeve. He stood five feet ten inches tall, and chose not to have a beard.

"Finish eating, clean the table, and join me in the study for an hour of fantastical learning. Then to bed."

Nancy and Nathan hurried their chores and entered the study much sooner than John had anticipated. He was looking forward to a small segment of time alone. He

groaned.

"Tell us about the wars," Nathan insisted.

"Yes," agreed Nancy. "Tell us about the times you fought in the wars."

"Sorcerers do not," John said slowly and forcefully, "fight in wars. The days of wizards blaring away on shofars and trumpets to goad armies into battle are long gone. Nor has any Magian ever cast spells over opposing armies, regardless what you read and hear. I was a surgeon. Nothing more. Nothing less. By the time you need my care, the two of you will also be qualified to mend and patch the fools who choose to cut and flay each other, if you so desire."

John paused and took a draught from his golden goblet. The apprentices knew it was wine. The sorcerer drank only wine from his sun-bright snifter.

"Back to our discourse, which will not be about warring. Tonight we will discuss flies."

The twins moaned and sat dejectedly on cushions at their master's feet.

"Listen and learn, apprentices. Two thousand years ago there were no flies."

The twins looked at him, disbelief causing their eyes to squint.

"You doubt me. I can tell. No matter. In all my volumes—" he waved a hand around the study which contained a mountainside of books. The twins feared the books. Not so much because they didn't want to read, but rather they were afraid they would one day have to read them all. Such a task would seem to apprentice them to John forever. John continued, repeating his words for effect. "In all my volumes, there is never a mention of the cursed, winged, biting vermin until about two thousand years ago. Spewed and spawned upon our planet at that time, they became a scourge that even the powers of one like myself cannot cause to abate."

"The ancient Egyptians, who performed many great feats, were so defeated by flies that in appeasement they made standards that bore the emblem of a fly. It helped them naught. In the writings of the Israelites, in their book of Psalms 78:45, it says, 'He sent divers sorts of flies among them, which ate them alive.' Also, in their book called Exodus, it says, '...and there came a grievous swarm of flies into the Pharaoh's palace...the land was made vile by reason of the swarm of flies.'"

John paused and smiled gently at the children. "You, too, will know of these and other wonders after you learn to read Latin, Greek and Hebrew."

"Master," Nancy inquired, "is it not enough that we learn to read and write the Celtic and Germanic languages?"

"Enough? Heavens no, child. We will also study the Sanskrit, Tocharic, Hittite, Baltic and Illyrian idioms during your tenure here. Plus, I have several manuscripts in Chaldean, Babylonian, Chinese, Aramaic and Arabic that have yet to be translated. I was hoping for you and Nathan to aid me in that quest. Back to the subject, though."

"Flies. I have a personal conviction, based on scientific observation, that flies have what I call an 'aura.' This aura is so constructed that flies have a perception that is beyond our comprehension."

"For example. When I kill a fly, another immediately zooms in to take its place. It is fantastic. I believe that when I killed the first fly, his aura, which can cover as little as one square inch or as much as one square mile, ceased to exist along with his life. His brother fly feels this existence perish and knows he can quickly fill the void with his own aura. I kill these parasites night and day, yet on the morrow there are as many as the day before. I suggest that it is due to these auras that these amazing events transpire. And with that helping of philosophy, I bid you good evening."

The apprentices were marched off to bed and John had an hour to himself for contemplative thought. Then he, too, made his bed.

He enjoyed arising just before sun-up. This gave him a little time to plan his day before he awakened his charges.

The following morning was spent, the twins grumbled, the same as other mornings. They gathered herbs and berries for breakfast, ate, and cleaned the kitchen, which was, as Nathan often said, gigantic enough to prepare meals for eighteen sorcerers and their apprentices.

After the morning chores, John allowed the twins to study as they wished. One of the few tendencies they possessed that John admired was a desire to learn on their own. Like curious youngling squirrels, he often observed, they would sniff here, and probe there, constantly curious about the world around them, and John the Sorcerer's world in particular.

Since he knew they could carry on without him, and they had an assignment to work on, John left them to their own stratagems and went outside to work the herb garden.

When John thought it was close to precisely three hours after sunrise, he checked the sundial, beamed at his shrewd observance, and gathered his apprentices in the study.

"Nancy?" he inquired. "Begin."

Nancy held up a two-foot-long section of willow bark. She placed it on the desk. It was a half-round, so it stood on its own. "A trap, Master. I mixed a concoction of honey and rye flour to form a paste. I then spread it on the inside of the willow bark."

John peered down at the inner surface of the bark. "Interesting. It has attracted the flies and captured them. Interesting. Nathan?"

"I have made an aura enhancer, Master," Nathan said. He produced a tightly woven, reed cage, two-feet-square with a small, hinged door, that buzzed with activity. "I have captured over forty flies and confined them to my aura enhancer. If you place the enhancer hereabouts, the combined aura of the flies within will create an aural wall to keep away other flies."

"Hmmm," John said, and he examined the cage. He couldn't imagine how the boy caught and confined so many of the pests. "Interesting."



John searched the apprentices with his eyes. Obviously they had expected something more than "interesting" from him.

"Very good. Very good," John said. "Both ideas were clever and imaginative. However, both are also unacceptable. They have a common failing. I have found, through astute observations, that not only does a fly's aura attract other flies when it dies...but when they are alive, their auras perform in much the same manner. I do not hesitate to say that at this very moment, all of these flies are sending out thought waves to their brethren and sistren to come join them. And, although these particular flies offer us no menace, when their kin arrive from every bog in the countryside, we shall be inundated.

"Again, apprentices. One more try. You may use a tiny bit of magic, if you see fit. No more. Use your imaginations." He shouted at them, "Summon up all the powers that exist between your ears and put them to use. Two hours."

John arose and went back outside to his herb garden. He left the apprentices staring numbly at each other.

John was on hands and knees, weeding a round plot of motherwort and squishing the hapless mealybugs who had mistakenly chosen the sorcerer's garden to dine in, when Nancy tapped him on the shoulder.

Although Nathan was the more rambunctious of the twins, Nancy was the braver.

"Master John," she began. "Nathan and I feel we have failed your expectations. We know not which trail you would have us travel. We were hoping you could shed some light our way on how we are to engage this problem."

Good Lord, he thought. The child should be a priest or king's counsel with such flowery talk.

"My guidance in this instance," John said, "is to offer no guidance. Worry not about failure, or pleasing me. Find an imaginative solution to the problem. Do not concern yourself over whether or not your findings are worthy. Now go, or I will have you weed the herbs and I will go and ruminate."

Nancy departed and John resumed weeding. Actually, he thought, he could think better while in the garden than elsewhere.

When two hours had elapsed, John convened with the two apprentices in the study once more.

"Nathan. You first, this time."

"My solution is in the dining hall, Master," Nathan said.

John arose and they all three went to the dining hall. On the center of the table, which could seat twenty or more people, was a mechanical contraption that John would have thought was beyond Nathan's capabilities. Especially in so short a time span. Nathan had lashed together willow and oak branches to make a rectangular box that stood six feet above the table. Within the box was a pendulum fashioned out of spare armor parts John kept in a shed. The pendulum was fastened to a wooden rod that ran through the rectangle and poked out at the end on the two sides

facing the ends of the table. A long tress hung from each end of the rod. The tresses looked like horsetails.

"It looks remarkably like a box with two horsetails attached," John deduced.

"Exactly, Master," Nathan said. Nathan sat down in a chair facing the box and pushed on a treadle under the table with his feet. The pendulum began moving from side to side and caused the horsetails to swish back and forth at the end of the box.

"I have always wondered, Master John, what a horse's tail was good for. Yesterday you spoke of flies. Horse flies, too. The only reason a horse has a tail is to keep away the horse flies. I have observed horses scientifically, Master. Their tails will keep flies away from the table in the dining room, as well."

John was amazed. It did look as if the boy was correct. There were no flies in the vicinity of the swishing tails. What amazed John most, though, was that Nathan had the audacity to bore a hole in the middle of one of the finest tables in the kingdom, so he could run a cord and pulley from the treadle to the pendulum. Also, John had no horses. If the knight who pastured his mounts nearby had two war horses with missing tails...he hoped the knight was still in mortal fear of magic.

"Yes," John said. "We will see how well it works this evening at our last meal of the day, with you at the treadle, I presume? Nancy? What surprise might you have in store for us this time?"

"Ta-da," Nancy chimed as she laid John's personal fly-killing belt on the table.

The hole Nathan had bored through the table had made John dizzy. Now, as he beheld his belt, he had to grab the edge of the table for support. His weapon had been mutilated. Nancy had drilled what looked like a thousand holes in the leather strap. Why she had done it was beyond John's comprehension.

"Watch, Great Sorcerer John." Nancy hefted the now-useless belt high over her head. "I have removed the aura of the belt! The flies can no longer tell of the belt's existence." She quickly swung the massive ruination down on a yellow sweatfly perched lazily on the table. Splat!

"Got him!" Nancy shrieked. "It works, my Teacher. The aura of the belt has been cut away, and now you can slaughter flies as easily as you can summon up spirits."

The twins grinned and looked at John. They were radiant. They were clearly pleased with the results they had attained.

John breathed deeply ten or eleven times. He was sure he had never vexed his own tutor near as badly as his charges did him.

When John had bargained with the children's parents thirteen years ago, it was to take into apprenticeship the offspring to be born the following May. His dreams had clearly shown the child to be a boy. When twins, a boy and a girl, were born, the parents assumed, quite reasonably John had to admit, that both would go to be apprenticed

to Great Sorcerer John in their twelfth year. Ever since, John had discarded as unreliable all magic that had to do with dreams.

He took a great gulp of air and pinned the apprentices in place with his eyes. The twins feared his eyes, and John knew it.

"So. You have both done well." He felt clearly that they had, yet because of his personal loss, he was disinclined to tell them. "And what have you learned today? Aside from acquiring an expertise with boring tools which I had no idea you were familiar with."

"How to kill flies," Nancy said.

"How to chase flies," Nathan added.

"No, no, no," John reprimanded. "Today you have learned something of far greater value than dispatching flies. You have learned how to handle failure." John thought the words sounded similar to those his own tutor had once used. "This morning you both failed. This afternoon, you both... ah... succeeded."

The twins looked puzzled.

"You have both found a way to use your imagination to overcome an obstacle. Remember how you felt after you had failed? I had to goad you into making another attempt.

Never... never let failure stop you. Everyone... swordsmen, priests, farmers, sorcerers, scribes and minstrels... especially sorcerers, scribes and minstrels... fails. They fail constantly. Only the ones who keep trying will be truly successful. That is what you have learned today. You have both succeeded.

"Now. Nathan, chop wood and gather roots for supper. Nancy, pick greens and bring the wood to the kitchen. Even great sorcerers and first-class apprentices must eat."

The twins skipped as they noisily existed the dining hall. John looked with sadness at the hole in the table and his mutilated belt. He remembered how many years he had been apprenticed to the great sorcerer, Roger. He wondered how many years the twins would be with him. Roger had white hair when he had finally decreed that John was capable enough to be on his own. John had never thought of Roger as being old enough for white hair.

John picked up the belt and whooshed it through the air. He sat at the table and treadled the horsetails. He laughed. Ingenious, he thought. Those two would be sorcerers, yet.

